

TRAVEL WRITING

Over the last decade travel writing as a genre has burst out of its seams. Not travel in the old sense of postcards and sun, what one writer termed as the 'tyranny of the local', but as explorations of culture (not just individual cultures, but complicated journeys into the new cultural areas being spawned with metronomic regularity in our borderless, satellite-stitched world), and ultimately, of the self, a style of writing started by Jan Morris-- that memorialist of the vanishing Empire--and to some extent, Bruce Chatwin, and more recently popularized by the *Granta* travel series, by Simon Winchester, Peter Mayle, even Isabel Allende. This new generation--among them Pankaj Mishra, Amit Chaudhuri--of authors are more than travel writers; all are to an extent analysts of the unstable, fluctuant heart of the modern nomad.

Here are two very different, restless Indians who practice the art. **Pico Iyer** talks about what he does, and why, while **Vikram Seth** wanders about in Kathmandu.

Pico Iyer: Perennial Traveler

AJIT BARAL

Pico Iyer has authored six books so far. Two of them *Cuba and the Night* and his latest, *Abandon* are fictions. And the rest-- *The Lady and the Monk*, *Falling off the Map*, *Tropical Classics* and *Video Night in Kathmandu* -- are travel writings. Four books of travel writing down the road he has been praised for "elevating travel reportage to new heights" and hailed as "the rightful heir to Jan Morris, Paul Theroux and company".

Ajit Baral interviewed Pico Iyer via e-mail when the latter was in India recently promoting his novel *Abandon*. It seems only fitting that Pico Iyer should be interviewed electronically, a man one is more likely to run into in transit lounges across the world, than in his home in Japan or California.

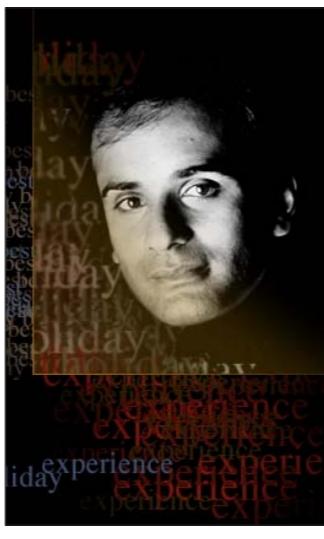
Ajit: The process of becoming

a writer never ceases to fascinate me. Would you like to say something about that with reference to yourself?

Pico: I think I had a head-start in terms of being a writer in that I was an outsider from birth--an Indian born in England, and moving to California at the age of seven, and therefore someone seeing everything around me (whether India or England or California) as somewhere foreign and therefore interesting. And then later I studied English, and nothing but English, for eight years, which left me nothing to do in life except write. Studying literature qualifies you only for unemployment, I fear.

Ajit: You started to travel in earnest at age 17. This is the time when you realised that you could write about places. What gave you the confidence, your ability with the pen or what?

Pico: In some ways, of course, I'd been traveling since I was



born, and from the age of nine had actually been going to school (in England, from California) by plane, which proved a good training for everything that came after. And later, as you say, when I began to travel more extensively, I found that I was scribbling furiously, keeping the kinds of notes and diary-entries that I never kept in my normal life. I feel that if I were sending such voluminous letters to my friends--and even, at some level, to myself--I might as well send them to strangers, too.

Ajit: I wonder what purpose does travel writings such as *The Great Railway Bazaar* or *Video Night in Kathmandu* primarily serve? Do they serve the purpose of a Lonely Planet guide? Of a literary work? Or, of a historical record?

Pico: That's a wonderful question. I think that travel books of the kind you mention are the opposite of guidebooks, in that

they don't tell you what to see, but how to see; in a way, they offer a pair of spectacles as subjective and distorted as any other, but allowing you to think about the world in a special way. In some sense, they offer you not sights but insights, and not information, but a vision (a vision you can quarrel with, but at least a vision that can force you to formulate your own opinions in response). In *Video Night*, I felt that there was nothing I could add to the wonderful accounts of the Taj, or the Great Wall, or Zen temples that writers much more accomplished than I had been offering for centuries; on the other hand, there was something new going on--a fresh kind of exoticism--in the ways the East was taking in the West and making it its own (the Bollywood versions of Rambo, the Japanese way of playing baseball, the Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet in Tiananmen Square) that no one had recorded yet, and that seemed to speak to a whole new global culture just coming into being.

Ajit: The world has become smaller and smaller. And the role of a travel writer as a guide to unbeaten tracks is losing relevance. Are travel writers a vanishing tribe? Or are they re-inventing themselves, their writings to prove their usefulness?

Pico: I actually don't think the world is really getting any smaller, and I do feel that there are always uncharted places to discover and record: Iraq right now for example is in many ways a new country, and one that no one has yet described in some more lasting way. South Africa became a new country nine years ago, and Iran is probably on the brink of becoming something different. The world is constantly in flux, and my sense is that there is never a shortage of new places to explore and come upon for the first time. On the

other hand, you're right that the travel-writing of fifty years ago, which could accomplish something remarkable just by going to Tibet or Patagonia or places most people could never get to, has less and less place in a world in which many people can access the most remote places on the Internet, or see them on TV, or even visit them in person. Travel-writing, like fiction or poetry, has to take on new forms to deal with a new kind of world; again, my sense is that the new uncharted universe that is coming to light exists at those places where cultures cross, more voluminously and speedily than ever before, and I feel that that is a whole new land that is to me as remarkable as Nepal or Morocco (in my next book, out next spring, I have a whole chapter on jet lag as a foreign land that no human had visited till forty or so years ago, but one where more and more of us spend more and more of our lives).

Ajit: Writers like Amitava Kumar think that journeys can be made through books. His *Bombay-London-New York* is in a way journey made through the reading of books. How do you see book journeys vis-à-vis geographic journeys?

Pico: I'm in many ways most interested in the kinds of journeys that can be made while sitting still--travel is only interesting to me in its inner effects, and the kind of transformations that can potentially come in the comfort of one's own home--and it's no coincidence that many of the great physical travelers are also great readers. Books are a form of travel as much as travels are a form of text. Books transport us around the world, and travel pels us across a whole range of texts.

Ajit: You once said in an interview that you write about the future. I however feel that you, and other travel writers as

well, write about the past, not the future. The place you wrote about yesterday will not be the same today; the world is changing -- and rapidly at that. I don't quite see how you were writing about the future when you wrote in *Video Night* about Freak Street, in Kathmandu, of which there is no trace left now.

Pico: I think I was suggesting that I'm less interested in roots than in flowerings; I don't have a very strong historical sense, and so, in most places that I visit, I'm much more compelled by the present and the future appearing around the corner than, say, musty churches or what happened in the place three hundred years ago. So in writing of Freak Street, say, I was writing of a new blending of East and West, a swapping of clothes and customs, that hadn't been imaginable when I was born, and when Nepal was all but inaccessible to the outside world. The airplane has been more a theme for me than the bullock-cart. You're right that, as with Zeno's arrow and its paradoxical non-arrival, one can never catch the present because, by the time one's written about it, or photographed it, it is gone; and yet one can orient oneself towards trying to see what the future holds, as I have one, or towards trying to chronicle and play of ideas; the book is to some extent a fascinated love-letter to Cuba. In *Abandon*, I think all the scenes are much more in the background, offering colour and variety, as sets in a film might, but not getting in the way of the central play of ideas, or the complicated dance of the two main characters. It's first and foremost a romance, a mystery and a novel of ideas. The scenery is just make-up.

assumptions I carry everywhere I go. It is, as much as anything, a Japanese friend I return to and a Benedictine monastery where I stay four times a year every year.

Ajit: You also write fiction. Which genre is more difficult to write, fiction or travelogue?

Pico: Fiction is more difficult, and therefore more attractive and interesting to me. Travel-writing--or any kind of non-fiction--is a much more cerebral activity, which can to some extent be planned and controlled, and can move along expected lines; fiction is about surrender, and not being able to bribe the Muse to make house-calls, or force inspiration to come, which makes it at once more frustrating and more magical. It's like the difference between walking around the block and completing a somerset in mid-air while holding a torch of flame in both hands.

Ajit: What's the response on your novels been like?

Pico: In my *Cuba* book, I felt that Cuba itself was the main character, whether in its embodiment, Lourdes, or in just the atmospheric and descriptive scenes that suffice the novel and aim to give it its particular flavor and play of ideas; the book is to some extent a fascinated love-letter to Cuba. In *Abandon*, I think all the scenes are much more in the background, offering colour and variety, as sets in a film might, but not getting in the way of the central play of ideas, or the complicated dance of the two main characters. It's first and foremost a romance, a mystery and a novel of ideas. The scenery is just make-up.

Ajit Baral is a frequent contributor to The Daily Star and various Nepalese newspapers. He lives in Kathmandu.

Vikram Seth



And here is Vikram Seth in Kathmandu, tired, wanting light's out, and yet writing a book about the places and feelings we Bengalis are familiar with; in Seth's writing exploration of

ney. I luxuriate in my tiredness; drift deliciously along, all energy spent, allowing sight to follow sight, thought to follow thought, for now (apart from the easily fulfillable intention of returning to Delhi) there nothing, no intermediate step that I must perform: there is no lift to look for, no hill to climb, no load to carry, no town en route. There are no papers that I have to obtain. For a person of fundamentally sedentary habits I have been wandering far too long; a continuously wandering life like Sui's would drive me crazy. I marvel at those travellers who, out of curiosity or a sense of mission, wander through unfamiliar environments for years on end. It requires an attitude of mind more capable of contentment with the present than my own. My drive to arrive is too strong. At many points in this journey, impatience has displaced enjoyment. This tension is the true cause of my exhaustion. When I am back in Delhi I will not move for a month, just sit at home, talk with my family and friends, read, rewind, sleep.

Kathmandu is vivid, mercenary, religious, with small shrines to flower-adorned deities along the narrowest and busiest streets; with fruitsellers, flutesellers, hawkers of post-cards and pornography; shops selling Western cosmetics, film rolls and chocolate; or copper utensils and Nepalese antiques. Film

songs blare out from the radios, car horns sound, bicycle bells ring, stray cows low questioningly at motorcycles, vendors shout out their wares. I indulge myself mindlessly: buy a bar of Tobler marzipan, a corn-on-the-cob roasted in a charcoal brazier on the pavement (rubbed with salt, chili powder and lemon); a couple of love story comics, and even a Reader's Digest. All this I wash down with Coca Cola and a nauseating orange drink, and feel much the better for it.

I look at the fluteseller standing in a corner of the square near the hotel. In his hand is a pole with an attachment at the top from which fifty or sixty *bansuris* protrude in all directions, like the quills of a porcupine. They are of bamboo: there are cross-flutes and recorders. From time to time he stands the pole on the ground, selects a flute and plays for a few minutes. The sound rises clearly above the noise of the traffic and the hawkers' cries. He plays slowly, meditatively, without excessive display. He does not shout out his wares. Occasionally he makes a sale, but in a curiously offhanded way as if this were incidental to his enterprise. Sometimes he breaks off playing to talk to the fruitseller. I imagine that this has been the pattern of his life for years.

I find it difficult to tear myself away from the square. Flute music always does this to me: it is at once the most universal and most

particular of sounds. There is no culture that does not have its flute--the *nehr*, the recorder, the Japanese *shakuhachi*, the deep *bansuri* of Hindustani classical music, the clear or breathy flutes of South America, the high-pitched Chinese flutes. Each has its specific fingering and compass. It weaves its own associations. Yet to hear any flute is, it seems to me, to be drawn into commonality of all mankind, to be moved by music closest in its phrases and sentences to the human voice. Its motive force is living breath: too needs to pause and breathe before it can go on.

That I can be so affected by a few familiar phrases on the *bansuri*, or by a piece of indigo paper surprises me at first, for on the previous occasions that I have returned home after a long absence abroad, I have hardly noticed such details, and certainly have not invested them with the significance I now do. I think it is the gradualness of my journey that has caused this. With air travel the shock of arrival is more immediate: the family, the country, the climate all strike with simultaneous impact so that the mind is bewildered, and the particular implications of small things obscured.

From the Penguin Book of Indian Journeys



Lonely Hearts in Dhaka

(with apologies to Strugnell)

FARHAD AHMED

Can someone make my wish come true?
Male Nazrul geet-ist seeks female for singing fun.
Do you live in Bhoote Goli? Is it true?

Gay Noakhali cook whose friends are few,
I'm into saris, Tagore and the sun.
Can someone make my wish come true?

Businessman in search of something new--
Perhaps arty, glass-bangled, young.
Do you live in Bhoote Goli? Is it true?

Successful, slim and secular? I am too--
Attractive Hindu lady with a son.
Can someone make my wish come true?

I'm Libran, inexperienced, a bit blue--
Need cut-bolt merchant under twenty-one.
Do you live in Bhoote Goli? Is it true?

Please write (with photo) to Box 152.
Who knows where it may lead once we've begun?
Can someone make my wish come true?

Do you live in Bhoote Goli? Is it true?

Letter from NEW YORK

ANJUM NIAZ

There was a time, decades ago, when Oriana Fallaci, not only unhinged bullies like Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Gen. Ziaul Haq but got them to grovel at her feet! At the zenith of their glory, these demagogues with oversized egos lusted to be interviewed by her and canonized as heroes of Islam before the world. They wooed, charmed, flirted and even stooped to conquer the hot-tempered Latin storied for her fierceness.

She carried her raven hair poker straight on her square shoulders, with high cheekbones and dark deep-set arrogant eyes that could burn with just one look. Her one account of meeting Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1972 just after he returned to an independent Bangladesh from a Pakistani jail, complete with sycophants kissing his feet and guerrillas storming into her hotel room, did much to reduce the Bangladeshi leader's image abroad. The Italian journalist was the scourge of empty vessels like Bhutto and Zia. Dumping the latter but selecting Bhutto as her star interviewee, one remembers the opinion-slinging duel that the black-and-white Pakistani television played over and over again in those halcyon days.

Fallaci was charitable to Bhutto, she had managed to tame him. Otherwise whenever, her subject did not cooperate, she labeled him a "bastard, a fascist, an idiot." But Bhutto's blabbing got him in trouble. His

loose lips gave away things to Fallaci about Indira Gandhi which almost put the Simla Agreement in jeopardy. I was told that an alarmed Pakistan Foreign Office frantically contacted the then Pakistan's Ambassador to Italy, Brig. Hamid Nawaz, over a weekend and sent him scurrying post haste in search of Fallaci all over Italy. Finally, the flustered envoy found Fallaci and begged her to expunge those remarks from her interview. She refused point blank and told the Ambassador to go take a flying leap!

The free spirit that she was, even tight-lipped Kissinger blurted a confession and tarred his image forever. Haughty Indira Gandhi invited Fallaci's ire and got burned in the process and Khomeini was told summarily that she'd had enough of wearing this "medieval garment" when she went to interview him in a *chaddar*.

Fallaci is so anti-immigration, so anti-Islam that she singles out countries like Pakistan, Albania, Sudanese, Bangladesh, Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria and Nigeria, calling the immigrants from these countries as "intruders who contribute to the drug trade and patronize prostitutes who spread AIDS." Full of hate, fire and fury, she wonders whether Osama bin Laden paid all the Islamic immigrants passage to the West "for the mere purpose of establishing the Reverse Crusade's settlements and better organizing Islamic terrorism."

The woman rants against American homosexuals and lesbians who question Bush's war against terror. Fallaci impugns homosexuals as "devoured... by the wrath of being half and half," and accuses feminists of "dreaming of being raped by bin Laden."

For Fallaci each and every Muslim on the face of the earth is a "threat"! "Oh, I could go on ad infinitum. Tell your things never told, things to make your hair stand on end. About that dotard Khomeini, for example, who after our interview held an assembly at Qom to declare that I had accused him of cutting off women's breasts," fulminates Fallaci. "I could tell you about Mujibur Rahman, who, again at Dacca, had ordered his guerrillas to eliminate me as a dangerous European, and lucky for me an English colonel saved me at the risk of his life. God, what people!

"The only ones I've had a civil relationship with, remain poor Ali Bhutto, the first prime minister of Pakistan, who was hanged

because he was too friendly to the West, and the most excellent king of Jordan: King Hussein. But those two were as Muslim as I am Catholic."

The greater half of her book is devoted to rah-rah of how great America is. Yet, she wants the reader to know she's not American-centric: "I am Italian. The fools who think I'm an American by now are wrong. I've never asked for American citizenship. Years ago an American ambassador offered it to me on Celebrity Status, and after thanking him I replied: "Sir, I'm very tired to America. I'm always arguing with it, always telling it off, but I'm still profoundly tied to it. For me America is a lover--no, a husband--to whom I will always be faithful. Assuming he doesn't sleep around of me. I care about this husband of mine."

"I like, for example, that when I come back to New York and hand over my passport and green card, the customs agent gives me a big smile and says 'Welcome home.' The gesture seems so generous, so affectionate. I also remember that America has always been the Refugium Peccatorum for people without a homeland. But I already have a homeland, sir. Italy is my Patria, and Italy is my mamma. I love Italy, sir. And it would seem like renouncing my mamma to take American citizenship."

Her sloppy prose and melodramatic praise of all things American today have drawn fire from many Europeans. France wanted her book banned. She is

Oriana Fallaci
THE RAGE AND THE PRIDE

also a sick woman who has battled cancer for years.

Suffering from cancer today, one remembers her with awe as being the best of the best. Dawn's former Editor Mr. Ahmad Ali Khan always recommended Fallaci's *Interview with History* to the paper's staffers, saying that her hard-hitting, trenchant social criticism and incisive interviewing skills were par excellence.

Fallaci's blind prejudice and denial that there is a moderate Islam can turn off her readers, who may well wonder why this small book has, in the publisher's words, "caused a turmoil never registered in decades" in Italy, France and Spain.

Anjum Niaz is a correspondent for Dawn newspaper in the United States. She lives in New Jersey.

Illustrated by Sabayashi Hazra